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ABSTRACT

In two parts, this paper discusses areas in family disruption, describes children's experiences of loss, and suggests strategies for helping children cope with such experiences. Specifically, part one provides: (1) global, normative summary descriptions of adjustment patterns of children from preschool age through adolescence and descriptions of implications for behavior in schools; (2) a description of social/cognitive developmental dimensions of adjustment patterns; (3) a brief depiction of problems faced by the post-divorce family; (4) a discussion of what schools can do to support the child under stress; (5) suggestions for preventive measures schools can take to help students deal with divorce; and (6) comments about other support systems for children and adolescents. Part two briefly discusses stages in children's experience of loss; examines developmental differences in their responses to loss; outlines factors affecting adjustment to loss (such as the closeness of the relationship and the psychological impact of the event); and suggests coping strategies, including communication, support systems, anticipatory education, use of a divorce adjustment profile to gather information, and bibliotherapy. (RH)

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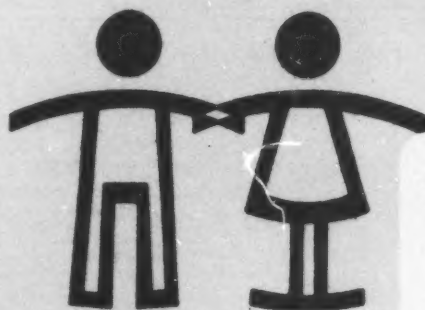
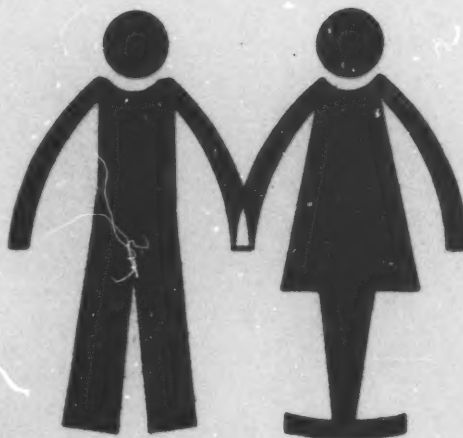
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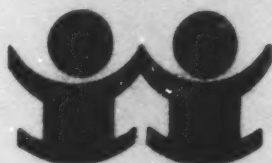
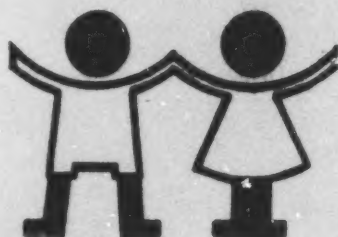
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CHILDREN AND LOSS

LOUISE ROWLING

Part 1: A TEACHER'S VIEW: THE CHILD IN THE SINGLE PARENT & BLENDED FAMILY

Part 2: HELPING CHILDREN COPE WITH LOSS

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PART ONE

A TEACHER'S VIEW:

THE CHILD IN THE SINGLE PARENT AND BLENDED FAMILY

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INTRODUCTION

At the present time schools are subject to pressure from all sections of the community. Teachers are being asked to deal with the results of a rapidly changing society e.g. multicultural groups, an increasing divorce rate and relationships resulting from blended families. This requires teachers to consider the individual needs of their pupils, which may be difficult when they have upwards of 30 in their care. But teachers are there to teach children not subjects. The individual needs of their pupils need to be considered, because no amount of excellent preparation and competent presentation of a subject will have a successful outcome if the learners are preoccupied with their own inner stresses, and family disruption has the potential to be an extremely traumatic time for children and adolescents.

Positive Outcomes of Divorce for Children

Many researchers tend to immediately focus on the negative aspects of family disruption without mentioning the positive outcomes which can emerge for young people who experience family disruption. A crisis event, which separation or divorce is for children, has the potential for growth of the individual (Weiss, 1979). As a result of their experiences of divorce, children often develop sensitivity to their peers' distress (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). They may, subsequent to the divorce, see their parents' decision as a successful problem solving strategy rather than a personal failure and they then have a model for successfully coping with stressful situations in later life (Kulka & Weingarten, 1979).

Studies have shown that children from intact but unhappy families have more problematic emotions and attitudes than children from divorced families (Kelly & Berg, 1978). Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) found that one third of the children in the five year follow-up to their study of children of divorce were doing especially well. Their self-esteem was high and they were coping well with tasks at home and at school. The important fact from this finding is that some of these children were unhappy and discouraged at the time of the initial family disruption. They had stabilized but, more impressively, had moved ahead, perhaps strengthened by the stresses they had overcome. Divorce could also be a release from a tense family situation.

This paper will focus on the problem areas in family disruption but that is not meant to lessen the importance of possible positive outcomes.

Adjustment to Divorce and the School Setting

What continuing stresses may be placed on pupils who move from a single parent situation to a blended family? What, then, are the stresses of family disruption that are important for children in relation to the school setting? Perhaps most importantly, what can schools do to minimise the hurt for children in their care?

Teachers are in an ideal position to judge if a pupil is reacting adversely to family disruption. Firstly because they may have prior knowledge of the

child before the crisis event and hence, observe if there is a change in behaviour. Secondly, their knowledge of child development allows them to see if a child is out of step with his/her peers. Thirdly, a child experiencing stress is very likely to exhibit reactions to it in social interactions and/or academic performance (Hetherington, Cox & Cox, 1979).

In the school setting the stress imposed on pre-school children who are experiencing family disruption could mean that they are likely to have less mature play patterns than their peers, with boys more affected than girls (Hetherington et al, 1979). Pre-schoolers, because of their shaken beliefs about relationships, may have difficulty relating to their teachers and could use socially unacceptable ways of relating to their peers (e.g., grabbing another child's paint brush as a way to instigate interaction)(Hetherington et al, 1979).

This lack of trust in adult figures and feelings of insecurity could be found with all age groups and will often be revealed as the pupil and teacher interact with one another.

The early primary school child's feelings of deprivation may be manifest in compulsive eating (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980) and a teacher has ample opportunity to see this, especially if it involves begging food from other pupils.

The late primary school child could appear to be coping well, due to the "layering of responses" (i.e. putting on an air of bravado to hide grief (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980)), but then could complain of frequent headaches and stomach aches. In this case, the distress has been converted to somatic symptoms.

The adolescent is likely to have a variety of reactions in the school situation. Some of these are that they may become more absorbed in school activities (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980), girls may react specifically to male teachers because of sexual insecurity if father is absent (Hetherington et al, 1976), their normal developmental progress may be accelerated, and they may become more mature (Weiss, 1979). In addition to these responses the added responsibilities at home could influence the amount of time available for school work. Many of the effects outlined above are generally apparent as the initial responses of adolescents to separation of parents.

Social/Cognitive Interpretation of Adjustment

The foregoing are normative responses to divorce i.e. global descriptions of adjustment patterns of particular age groups. Researchers have also isolated developmental factors that determine this response (Longfellow, 1979; Wallerstein et al, 1980; Kurdek, 1981; Kurdek, Blisk & Sieskey, 1981). The developmental factors that define the child's adjustment pattern from this viewpoint are:

- a) cognitive ability to assess the situation
- b) ability to infer other motives and feelings
- c) ability to assess own role
- d) ability to experience some control over the situation (Kurdek, 1981).

The preschool child is unable to take another's viewpoint and, consequently, has difficulty understanding the parent's position in divorce. Children's cognitive level of development precludes their construction of an accurate

picture of the divorce, resulting in them frequently blaming themselves for the situation. Pre-schoolers feel helpless and believe their own relationship with the parent could come apart (Longfellow, 1979).

Early primary school children can see that their parents have needs different to their own, but cannot see that if the husband and wife separate, either can still wish to have an ongoing relationship with the child. The child's view of what has occurred between the parents is determined by their subjective evaluation of events (Longfellow, 1979). They do not feel they are to blame, but desire reconciliation between parents.

The *late primary school* age child has developed "self-reflective reasoning" (Selman & Byrne, 1974). They can see that each person is motivated by his/her own set of values and attitudes. Because children in this age group are aware of how others view them, they are likely to experience shame about the divorce. The ability to reflect on their own thoughts and behaviour from another's viewpoint makes role-playing an ideal technique for helping these children come to terms with their feelings.

The *adolescent's* social and cognitive development has advanced to allow him/her to take the third person view of his/her relationship (Longfellow, 1979). Adolescents, therefore, have the potential to understand the changing relationship between their parents and themselves.

The Post-Divorce Family

A child or adolescent may have to move from coping with the initial divorce/separation to coping with access and custody disputes. Many children react strongly to access visits - so Monday morning after access weekends could be a difficult time in schools. This is not so much a result of the child not wanting to visit the non-custodial parent, but more that the experience rekindles feelings of hurt and divided loyalties. The situation could be uncertain and strained as parent and child adjust to changed circumstances. In the school situation it could be that homework or project work is not done because the child has not been in his/her usual environment.

A child or adolescent may then move on to having to cope with a blended or reconstituted family (for example, with a step parent, step sibling). Problems of adjustment to new relationships re-emerge: jealousy of the "new" parent, loyalty to the "old" parent, the feeling of pressure to instantly "love" the new parent and so on. What this means for schools is that there may be re-emergence of problems for pupils who have previously coped remarkably well.

What Can Schools Do?

Parent/school communication is a large problem with regards to family matters. The issue of privacy for the parent and child is all important. Parents are faced with the dilemma of not wishing to have their children labelled as coming from a "broken" home if they inform the school of the situation, yet knowing the school must be informed, because the child's behaviour at school could be affected by the family disruption. Teachers do need information about what is occurring in the family for their effective functioning in relation to each child in their care. The information need not be detailed but enough to aid the teacher and the school in supporting the child during this stressful time. The school needs to ensure that the information is not used as a negative label for the child.

At the time of the initial separation, the parent may not have the inner resources to communicate with the school, but this situation could be eased

by principals, school counsellors and/or teachers being particularly sympathetic to the distress and difficulty the parent may be experiencing as they come to inform the school of the home situation (Drake & Shellenberger, 1981). If parents are too stressed to inform the school, arrangements could be made for an intermediary to make the initial contact, with the parents following up later. If a young child is involved the teacher needs to know just how much the child has been told so that the support given the child can be maximised. There is no easy solution to the problems of how, when, and to whom parents should communicate information about parental separation and of what information should be passed on. In each situation a variety of factors needs to be taken into account. However, for the good of the child, the school needs to know!

An understanding by teachers of what the child may be experiencing may help with disciplinary problems that could arise. Because of the distress the pupil is experiencing he/she may not be able to control his/her behaviour as well as on other occasions and this needs to be taken into consideration.

Day-to-day school functioning may ignore the child from the single parent or blended family, for example, when corresponding with the home. Does the school make provision for finding out if correspondence should be addressed to Mr, Mrs, Ms or even to an adult with a different surname to that of the child? In consideration given to single parents attending school for parent/teacher interviews - is provision made for children to be cared for while the parent in a single parent family visits the school for parent/teacher interviews? In the matter of finances teachers need to be aware that pupils may be too proud to say their families cannot afford something. Teachers need to be sensitive to this possibility and use the facilities usually in schools, for such situations. For example, the administration of some schools and/or the Parents and Citizens Associations put aside money each year for situations where pupils are experiencing financial hardship.

More difficult problems arise for schools in regard to access and custody. A teacher may be called upon by a Family Court Counsellor to write a report on a child for a custody case. This report needs to be objective and should refer to such matters as: the child's academic progress and, in particular, whether there has been an improvement or deterioration; the child's development in comparison with his/her peers; his/her relationships with school mates. In matters of custody the school should be aware of which parent has custody and not release the child into the care of the non-custodial parent without the written approval of the custodial parent. Schools can always get advice on these matters from the Intake Counsellor at the Family Law Court.

Helping Children to Understand Divorce

On a broader perspective, it is unreasonable to expect children and adolescents to cope optimally with the great emotional, financial and social stress of divorce if the first opportunity they have to consider the issues and feelings involved is when they are actually experiencing the severe emotional stress of the event (Benedek & Benedek, 1979). If a significant proportion of children and adolescents are to experience family disruption, then maybe they should, as has been suggested (Caplan, 1964), be "inoculated", in warm, supportive, caring environments. Evidence supports the belief that as a result of thinking and talking about events, prior to their occurrence, they are better able to cope when the

situation occurs (Benedek & Benedek, 1979).

Within the school curriculum, particularly in high school, the topic of divorce should be aired - not so that it becomes an everyday socially acceptable occurrence, but so that all pupils have an understanding of what is involved. A number of obstacles exist to this suggestion. Firstly, there are already enormous pressures on schools trying to influence what should and should not be in the curriculum. Secondly, divorce is an emotional and unpleasant subject and is extremely sensitive in nature, in that there will be pupils with first-hand experience of divorce in the class (Bledsoe, 1978). It could be suggested that only those pupils who have experienced divorce need "education", but just because pupils have not experienced family disruption does not mean that they do not think about it, nor that they have no fear or anxiety about it. They do! (Holdahl & Caspersen, 1978). The greatest need is for the topic to be handled sensitively and in a supportive way - not by didactic methods, but by techniques such as those which involve the pupils in listening to their peers and talking about their feelings (e.g. role plays, values clarification activities, moral dilemmas). "Classroom exposure to the issue could provide a form of primary prevention for pupils who might later experience family conflict as children, or even later as parents" (Benedek & Benedek 1979, p 165).

Teachers and school counsellors can provide help to children and adolescents by being supportive adults, who are able to bring an objective point of view to the situation. Individual discussions could be held with children to determine their understanding of what is occurring by asking such questions as: "What do you think is happening between your parents? Why are your parents getting a divorce? How does this make you feel?" In this role, teachers can help pupils understand their feelings and distinguish fact from fantasy (Banning, 1979).

Other Support Systems for Children and Adolescents

Children do not always automatically turn to others for help in such times as these.

There is evidence that the divorce adjustment of adults is mitigated by turning to friends and relatives for support (Kurdek, 1981). Would it not then seem feasible for children's divorce adjustment to be aided by the availability and use of support systems? Studies by Hetherington et al (1979) and Beal (1979) indicate that children's help seeking behaviour is a generalised trait. Consequently, those that seek help from parents are also more likely to seek help from teachers. Hopefully, then, such children are likely to get the support they need. But, what about those who do not seek help? What can be done for them? Some other form of help on a community or school basis needs to be available. Children experiencing family disruption often find other children whose parents are already divorced, to be of great value in dealing with divorce-related concerns (Kurdek, 1981) and group intervention programmes could capitalise on this fact.

A number of programmes have been run overseas for children experiencing family disruption (Cantor, 1977; Magid, 1977; Holdahl & Caspersen, 1978; Effron, 1980; Sonnenschein-Schneider & Baird, 1980; Hammond, 1981). These programmes are conducted so that they are suited to the children's developmental level.

Early primary school pupils are still fairly egocentric. They will want to tell and re-tell their own story. This could be seen as repetitive but it does serve the purpose of peer validation, i.e. hearing another child say they felt responsible for his/her parent's divorce could help a child who was feeling that he/she was the only one who had felt this. This experience also gives the child a chance to see how they felt in comparison to other group members and to come to believe that bad experiences are surmountable (Sonnenshein-Schneider et al, 1980). Children in this age group respond to concrete activities such as puppets and drawing as aids to help them express their feelings.

As described earlier in this paper, the late primary school age child is more able to perceive how others are feeling, so that role plays would be particularly useful with this group (Holdahl & Caspersen, 1978). This is also an age when peer attitude is influencing behaviour. The late primary school age child wants to be like others in a variety of things such as dress and preference for a particular football team. Consequently, having a "different" family situation could be of concern. Support could be obtained from peers who have, or are experiencing family disruption so the child no longer feels "different". These other children could act as models of successful coping with particular feelings and situations that their peers are currently experiencing.

Adolescents can be influenced by peers also, so group intervention would be particularly useful for this age group. All pupils who have experienced family disruption could be involved in these groups, and not just those having adjustment problems.

All of these groups would provide the opportunity for the participants to verbalise their feelings, and researchers have found that children do reach an understanding of their parents' divorce on a cognitive level (Kurdek, et al, 1981). But another important component in their adjustment is in the affective area. Discussion as a result of role reversals in scripted role plays, or values activities should be included in the groups to help the children understand how others feel. In this way they may be better able to come to terms with their own feelings, for it is in the affective area that children take the longest time to adjust (Kurdek et al, 1981).

CONCLUSION

For some children, school is a refuge - it provides the only stable routine in their disordered lives. It should be utilised to allow for optimal adjustment for children and adolescents experiencing family disruption.

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Wales.*

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PART TWO

HELPING CHILDREN COPE WITH LOSS

INTRODUCTION

Numerous writers have identified crisis events in people's lives as times of either potential growth (Weiss, 1979; Sheehy, 1976; Downey, 1983) or of interference with development (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980; Eisen, 1979). Loss and change are a part of all children's lives yet they are potentially crisis events for children and consequently have the potential for developmental growth. There is a need for community awareness of these events in order to maximise the positive outcomes (Rowling, 1983) rather than to stress the negative.

This paper will examine children's loss experiences, particularly those of death and divorce, and suggest strategies for helping children cope with these experiences.

CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCE OF LOSS

Children's loss experiences may involve change in friendships, loss of a much loved teacher, loss of a pet, parental divorce or separation, or the death of a friend, parent or sibling. There is a variety of possible reactions to these experiences. These will be discussed only briefly here as they are the subject of previous seminars (Phillips, 1980; Phillips, 1982).

Denial or Disbelief

A child's impassive response to the news of the death of a loved one or parental separation may be the result of an inability to organize and handle the feelings being experienced. Children may be endeavouring to create a "breathing space" to help adjust to the situation or trying to convince themselves that the loss is not permanent. Adults may interpret this indifference as the child's "being strong" or as heartlessness on the child's part (Eddy & Alles, 1983). This apparent non-reaction is not the case - children usually care very much but have difficulty organizing and expressing their feelings.

Children may seem overly curious about details of the death or divorce in a manner which can be disturbing to adults. Yet going over the details is a child's way of understanding events (Gordon & Klass, 1979).

Anger and Guilt

Anger from children as a result of loss can occur for a variety of reasons. Firstly, it can be towards someone whom they believe did or did not do "the right thing". For example, the driver whose car ran over a child's dog, or the doctors who failed to save the life of the child's parent may be the object of a child's anger. Secondly, adults are seen by children as having control over their lives (Eddy & Alles, 1983) so that if a child is told "Grandma has gone on a holiday", the child could be hostile to Grandma for abandoning them. Thirdly, the loss can result in feelings of insecurity (Mitchell, 1973) which may result in temper tantrums or aggressive behaviour at school.

The guilt which a child feels as a result of loss may be due to a variety of factors. Firstly, if it is a sibling who has died a child may feel his/her

unconscious wishes have come true. That is, children often wish they were the only child, so that if a sibling dies the child may feel it was because the he/she wished it (Cain, Fast & Erikson, 1964). A second source of guilt is children's perception of their role in events. That is, they believe it is because they were naughty that their parents are now separating. This guilt which children experience is often unrecognised by adults.

Bargaining and Withdrawal

A child's inability to handle the fears and anxieties involved in a loss experience may result in withdrawal. This can be accompanied by depression and physiological distress (Eddy & Alles, 1983). Thus children may not be able to sleep, or may lose their appetite, feel tightness in the throat and regress in behaviour (Eisen, 1979); or, in an attempt to cope, may bargain "to be good" to bring back their dead pet or reconcile their parents.

Adults need an awareness of these reactions to loss in order to provide appropriate support. A knowledge of children's developmental levels is also useful in understanding the responses of children to these experiences.

Social Cognitive Development

A child's developmental level is of vital importance in understanding their experiences. These have been detailed previously in seminars of the Unit (Phillips, 1980; Phillips, 1982) so only the most important elements will be restated in this paper, where the emphasis will be their relation to loss experiences in general.

Infants

A recent researcher (Kurdek, 1981) found that infants' responses are on substantially the emotional level. The infant picks up the anger, depression and anxiety typical of a caregiver who is experiencing loss. Consequently infants' sleeping and feeding patterns are likely to be disturbed as signs of the distress they are experiencing.

Pre-schoolers

This age group view events from an egocentric perspective, that is, they cannot construct an accurate picture of parental death or divorce or the death of their pet from any other point of view than their own. Pre-schoolers' view of their central involvement in things, contributes to their feelings of guilt about their naughtiness causing events. For example, they may feel it is because they did not play with their dog that it died, or that their parents separated because they were a "bad" boy or girl.

School age children

Children of 6 - 8 years cannot comprehend the reciprocal nature of human relationships (Longfellow, 1979). Consequently they are likely to believe Dad does not love them any more otherwise he would not have left.

The late primary school age child uses "self reflective" reasoning (Selman & Byrne, 1974) so that they have an awareness of how others may feel. This means they could feel ashamed of coming from a single-parent household (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). The ability to assess how others feel means they have the capacity to be caring to younger siblings or friends who may be grieving.

Adolescents

An adolescent's social-cognitive viewpoint has developed to such an extent that he/she is able to comprehend the complexity of human relationships. They have the capacity to simultaneously consider a situation from their own perspective and from the perspective of others (Smiley & Goldsmith, 1981). Adolescents have the capacity to understand their loss experiences but their feelings about them may not be so clear-cut. Opinion is divided with regards to the impact of these loss experiences on adolescents. Some believe the adolescent is minimally affected because he/she has more control over the situation and can turn to outside sources for help (Kurdek, 1981). Others, for example, Wallerstein and Kelly (1980), believe that the developing adolescent identity can be threatened if there is a change in family circumstances such as the change to a single parent household. At a time when the adolescent needs a safe and predictable environment he/she is faced with disruption, role changes and great uncertainty about the present and future (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). The adolescent thrown into a single parent household may need to accept greater responsibility for caring for younger siblings, everyday household tasks and family decision-making. However, this situation may not necessarily be negative (Rowling, 1983) as some adolescents believe these experiences help them mature (Robson, 1979).

An adolescent's developing identity may also be threatened by his/her first broken love affair because of the loss of the closeness of that relationship.

FACTORS AFFECTING ADJUSTMENT TO LOSS

Along with developmental age, there appear to be a variety of factors that will affect a child's or adolescent's response to loss (Kulka & Weingarten, 1979; Mitchell, 1973). The most important of these are:

1. *The closeness of the relationship.* For example, the death of a pet that was the child's constant companion may greatly affect a child, whereas the death of a grandparent the child has had little contact with, may have little effect.
2. *The psychological impact of the event.* If an adolescent has lost the use of a limb his/her developing self identity, influenced greatly by body image, could be affected.
3. *The amount of life change involved.* A child whose parents divorce, may lose a parent, need to change schools, neighbourhoods and friends, lose contact with the absent parent's relatives, experience change in financial circumstances, or even disruption to sibling relationships if siblings are separated.
4. *The previous experience of change and loss.* A child's first experience of death may require a great deal of explanation from his or her parents. Later losses can draw on this experience and hence may be easier for the child to deal with.
5. *Adult attitude to loss.* If a parent is understanding of an adolescent's distress with the loss of a boy/girlfriend, or a teacher helps a child whose parents are separating, then the experience is more likely to have a positive outcome for the individual.

With this knowledge about the reactions of children and adolescents to loss experiences and their thoughts and feelings about these experiences, as well as of the factors that can affect the loss, what can be done to help them through these potential crises?

STRATEGIES TO HELP CHILDREN COPE WITH LOSS

Communication

Many writers have stressed the need to explain honestly to a child what is happening (Banks, 1981; Gordon & Klass, 1979), keeping in mind the child's sometimes limited ability to understand. Hence the use of euphemisms is to be avoided. Explanations such as "Grandma has gone on a holiday", "Death is just like being asleep", "You are the man of the house now", "Mum loves someone else more than she loves us and has gone to live with him", are all inappropriate in talking with a child. Above all, children tend to take "gone away" statements literally and may feel rejected.

Similarly, books with conceptually valid notions should be sought, if literature is to be used to help explain things to children. For example, it may be unwise to present a story of young children where the dead person speaks from the grave or comes back to life again (Fassler, 1978), or where the child is able to reconcile their parents by being good. Such misrepresentations do not help the child cope with reality.

Support Systems

The value of support systems to people experiencing loss is well documented (Hetherington, Cox & Cox, 1976; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980; Downey, 1983). There are a variety of social networks available to people including family, friends, religious contacts, social welfare, mental health professionals, work, school, recreation and community groups. The availability of good support systems is related to lower incidences of mental and physical disorder due to stress (Downey, 1983). Yet the availability of support systems is not enough. For a positive outcome an individual needs to perceive the supportiveness of these individuals and groups. It is important, therefore, to help those in need to recognise potential supportive systems and a method for doing this has been developed in the eco-map (Hartman, 1978). This involves getting someone to represent diagrammatically their existing support network and this method (with some modification) would appear to have particular potential for use with children who may have difficulty in expressing from whom they get help and to whom they would go to seek help.

The eco-map could be used with children by employing the following instructions (In the case of younger children simpler instructions may be needed):

1. "Draw a circle in the middle of the page to represent yourself."
2. "Draw circles around your circle to show people you might talk to if something was worrying you; say something about school or your family. Put circles close to you of those you would be most likely to talk with, and those that you might not talk with as much put further away from you."
3. Alternatively, you might give a child a list of people and groups and ask the child to "draw circles to represent the people or groups you would use". Also ask the child "to vary the distance from your own circle according to whether you would be likely to use them or not likely to use them very often".

In this way a clearer picture would be given of the support available to a child. This could then become the basis for discussion of existing and potential support networks. For example, an almost empty eco-map could indicate the child's feeling of loneliness and isolation. Potential support systems could then be explored with the child.

Anticipatory Education

Education based on the tenets of life-span human development can occur within the family situation and/or the school. The controversy about the nature and degree of involvement of schools in children's life experiences has been considered in Part One of this Selected Paper so will not be re-stated here.

But, in the case of children and divorce, the degree of support and the sensitivity of schools has been found to be a factor in the adequate developmental progress of children (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). There are a large number of children in schools affected to a greater or lesser degree, by loss due to divorce. These losses may result in developmental interference. Schools are in an ideal position to help in this matter (Drake, 1981) and assist in promoting positive outcomes.

It is not only the experience of divorce that can affect a child at school, for Eisen (1979) states:

"as the experience of loss is almost universal and is of particular import to children, all children are probably at some time suffering stress from this source" (p 197).

Life-span intervention is based on the belief that exploring fears and anxieties about an event, before it happens (if it does) is likely to diminish the impact of the event (Eddy & Alles, 1983; Gordon & Klass, 1979; Mitchell, 1973). This life-span view of human development suggests that a child's ability to cope with loss experiences is a function of the child's developmental history (Eddy & Alles, 1983). This history involves previous discussions and experiences of loss and how these were handled by the individual and his/her family, friends and other adults he or she has contact with.

Eddy and Alles (1983) suggest that discussions and explanations about loss and change can occur from infancy, for example, with discussions of the life cycle when an infant loses their baby teeth or the loss of the baby role when a younger sibling is born. The emotional impact of loss can be discussed following the death of a pet. With this event the discussion can involve decision-making (how to dispose of the body), information-sharing (knowledge about the life cycle), coping behaviour (how to handle the emotional impact of the event), and values clarification (considering whether the dead pet should be replaced) (Eddy & Alles, 1983).

These experiences provide the opportunity for development of skills to cope with loss experiences. The opportunity may be provided by the family or by the family and the school, but should be carried out where and with whom the child feels safe and secure. Adults discussing loss with children should listen carefully to the children's ideas and give simple, but honest and factual answers. The information given should not exceed the level of the child's curiosity.

This perspective concentrates on the need to develop competencies throughout the life span rather than just remediating problems when they occur.

Divorce Adjustment Profile

The loss experience of divorce is different from that of death, in that death is a finite event whereas divorce can be a protracted series of events. Consequently, there may be a greater need to attempt to assess how a child is coping with divorce. The following divorce adjustment profile is adapted from Kelly and Wallerstein (1977).

a) Developmental milestones

1. *Parent's history of the child.* The information depends on the age of the child, but could include things like toileting for young children; eating and sleeping patterns; interactions with siblings.
2. *School's history of the child.* This should focus on their academic and behavioural functioning: enthusiasm for learning, capacity to concentrate, adult/peer interactions, attendance, achievement, or anxiety.
3. *Direct observations.* This should involve general observations of the child, by the person compiling the profile (not the teacher or parent) in the classroom and in the playground.
4. *Coping mechanisms.* Do the methods the child used before when they were unhappy, work for them in this new stress situation? Or have new coping behaviours emerged e.g. aligning with one parent, absorbing themselves in outside activities? Do these coping mechanisms appear to be helping the child?

b) Interview with the child to gain an understanding of his/her response to the divorce/separation

1. *Feelings, thoughts and fantasies.* Matters needing to be discussed include: What does the child think is going on between the parents? What private ideas has the child about divorce? What does the child think is going to happen? What does the child wish would happen? How does the child *feel* about the divorce? (Try to assess nature and intensity of feelings).
2. *Reactions to stress.* Does the child appear as normal or more outgoing, aggressive, withdrawn? Is the behaviour at home and school similar to before the separation? Is the behaviour at home similar to before the separation, but the child is reacting at school? Are there new behaviours e.g. truancy, over-eating, irritability, depression, withdrawal, tantrums?

c) Assessment of support systems

1. *Immediate and extended family.* Are one or both parents so affected by the separation, that they are unable to render emotional support to the child? Has contact been lost with one parent and/or that parent's family (e.g. the child's grandparents)? Is one sibling antagonistic to others or are they supportive to each other? Are there aunts, uncles, grandparents in close contact?
2. *Non-familial support.* Is the child able to talk to the parent of a friend, a neighbour, his/her peers? Does the child have a pet?
3. *Extracurricular and/or community involvement.* Does the child get support by participating in outside activities, relating to adult figures there e.g. football coach, scout or cubmaster, church group?
4. *School.* Is there a teacher to whom the child relates well? Or other school personnel e.g. janitor, secretary, teacher's aide? Is the school counsellor available? Are there other children who could be brought together to talk about their experience with their parent's divorce, to help remove the shame and fear for the child?

d) *Summary*

In putting all this information together, what conclusions can be reached about the child?

e) *Proposed action*

Will there be some direct intervention to help the child? Will an effort be made to help the parents? Will assistance be sought for the child from the school counsellor? Will a group of children who have experienced similar events be brought together? If the divorce involves legal proceedings will the court counsellor dealing with the situation be contacted?

f) *Three month follow-up*

Is the child's adjustment better, worse, or the same? Is further action needed?

Bibliotherapy

Some writers (Bernstein, 1983; Wass & Corr, 1982) recommend the use of children's literature as bibliotherapy - "a kind of therapeutic or constructive intervention in the lives of children through books" (Wass & Corr, 1982, p 69).

Books have the potential to help children grow as there exists the possibility of an emotional interaction between the child and the story and/or the storyteller (Fassler, 1978). Stories therefore encourage the discussion of feelings and fantasies in a positive yet slightly removed manner, and in a way that the direct experience of the event does not allow. Fassler (1978) suggests the following activities to make stories more useful in this role:

1. allow children to express their feelings about the material being read;
2. allow children to talk openly about their experiences;
3. explore some of the common reactions children have to loss experience through questions. For example: "Was John responsible for his brother's death?" "Did the dog die as a punishment for Susan?" "Did Mary cause her parent's divorce?"

These are questions that may tap into children's thoughts, feelings, experiences and fantasies (Fassler, 1978) but children should not be forced to answer them and adults need to be sensitive to, and accepting of, children's responses. These discussions may not solve problems but will allow free discussion whereby the children may obtain some emotional support. The discussions also permit the children to see topics, not as taboo, but as events adults are prepared to talk about freely. The children will take from the stories what they need.

"Each story-child-adult interaction is likely to be unique ... no one story can be considered as a panacea for all children who must face a stressful situation, nor can it be expected that a selected story will hold the same significance or elicit similar reactions wherever and whenever it is presented."
(fassler, 1978, p 7)

CONCLUSION

Information about the effect of a variety of loss experiences on children and about strategies for helping children and adolescents cope with loss is available. Maybe we should now be looking to other loss experiences to ascertain their impact. For example, the loss experiences of children who come to this country as refugees from war torn homes. What have they lost? Some possibilities are that they have lost family, friends, home, and cultural identity. We can only hypothesize about the adjustments and coping skills needed in these situations.

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